

## Tackling alcohol-related violence

by Narelle Schuh

Alcohol-fuelled violence has steadily become a major problem for communities across NSW, not only in the Sydney CBD. For the last several years the AMA (NSW) has been actively engaged in lobbying the Government for a tough stance on our 24/7 drinking culture, with the result that strict liquor laws in NSW took effect on 24 February 2014.

The AMA (NSW) welcomed the announcement by Premier Barry O'Farrell on new laws to reduce alcohol-fuelled violence. The new laws are a step in the right direction towards combating the devastating violence across the state, however the issue of Australia's association with alcohol – call it abuse, mis-treatment or obsession – is a multi-faceted one.

AMA (NSW) President, A/Prof. Brian Owler says, "The 1:30am lockouts and 3:00am last drinks for licensed venues in the Sydney CBD are very welcome moves from the Government. These are also very similar to the Newcastle plan that the AMA has been advocating for some time, with proven effectiveness in cutting alcohol-fuelled violence".

An earlier state-wide closing time for bottleshops of 10:00pm is welcomed as is the freeze on licenses for new pubs and clubs in the Sydney CBD, noting however that small bars serving fewer than 60 patrons, restaurants and tourist accommodation establishments are exempt.

"These new laws are not targeting people who drink responsibly," says A/Prof. Brian Owler. "These laws provide some good preventative measures to reduce alcohol-fuelled violence. Every weekend our hospitals are filled with people who have sustained preventable injuries as a result of alcohol-fuelled attacks or from accidents while drunk. Too many people have already lost their lives or sustained permanent brain damage or paralysis from these sort of events. I'm very glad the State Government has acted in this way."

The AMA is calling on the Federal Government to convene a National Summit to discuss and assess the evidence and develop effective national solutions to the epidemic of alcohol misuse and harms afflicting local communities. Federal AMA President, Dr Steve Hambleton; Federal AMA Vice-

President, Professor Geoffrey Dobb; A/Prof. Brian Owler; and AMA Victoria President, Dr Stephen Parnis held a media conference in January 2014 to outline practical measures to tackle alcohol misuse.

The AMA is seeking a whole-of-government approach from all governments that looks at harm minimisation, the marketing of alcohol and how young people are exposed to this marketing, pricing and taxation, venue licensing and opening hours. A broad review of the harms of alcohol misuse in the community is required, including an inquiry into alcohol marketing, particularly the exposure to young people.

The AMA believes a National Summit, convened by the Federal Government, would bring together the experience, expertise and passion to bring about much-needed meaningful change to Australia's alcohol culture. This proposal is in addition to the AMA's push for a Parliamentary Inquiry into the marketing of alcohol to young people and its call for the closure of a loophole in regulations allowing alcohol companies to promote their products during television sports broadcasts before 8.30pm.



Australians should not accept that alcohol-fuelled violence is just a part of our way of life and goes hand-in-hand with being a global nation.

### AMA (NSW) takes action

#### OPINION PIECES AND MEDIA

As a neurosurgeon, A/Prof. Brian Owler is no stranger to consequences of alcohol-fuelled violence and has strongly advocated solutions for this public and preventive health issue. His opinion pieces in *The Advertiser* in September 2012 and *The Newcastle Herald* in January 2014 are examples of the strong commitment of the AMA (NSW) towards finding a solution. Over the last several years, A/Prof. Owler has been a widely-requested media spokesperson on this issue.

*I was in an emergency department in Sydney, talking to a young man's father who was back in the UK. After breaking the news over the phone I could hear his panicked voice echo down the phone as he called to his wife. He relayed the news; their son had broken his neck. He had fallen off a balcony. Drunk.*

*That New Year's Eve, and the phone call, is seared into my memory.*

#### SUBMISSION ON ALCOHOL HARM TO THE CITIZEN'S JURY FOR A 'VIBRANT AND SAFE SYDNEY'

Most recently the AMA (NSW) wrote a submission to *The newDemocracy Foundation*, an independent, non-partisan research organisation aiming to identify improvements to our democratic process. In its submission the AMA (NSW) states:

- Harm minimisation in the context of alcohol consumption needs to be one of the core issues addressed when discussing a 'vibrant and safe Sydney'.

- Alcohol-related violence and its impact on the community is a complex issue and requires a whole-of-government strategy that puts the health and safety of the public ahead of the alcohol industry and vested interests.

- The NSW Government's pending response to the Report on the statutory review of the *Liquor Act 2007* is a key opportunity for effective alcohol policy reform, particularly in the areas of licensing regulation, licensed premises trading hours and alcohol promotion and marketing.

#### REVIEW OF THE LIQUOR ACT 2007

The AMA (NSW) has made a submission to the *Review of the Liquor Act 2007*, to which the NSW Government will make an official response in coming months. The review aims to:

- Improve access to and participation in the liquor regulatory system for stakeholders including the community.
- Provide effective regulatory tools to prevent and respond to alcohol-related harm.
- Reduce unnecessary costs and red tape.
- Promote informality, timeliness and transparency in decision-making.
- Address technical issues with the current law which impede its operation.
- Provide a better grounding for future liquor regulatory and policy decisions.



#### MEMBER OF THE NSW/ACT ALCOHOL POLICY ALLIANCE (NAAPA)

The AMA (NSW) is a member of the Alliance of health and community organisations formed with the objective of promoting action to reduce alcohol-related harms. NAAPA lobbies and campaigns for alcohol policy reform to reduce alcohol-related harms across NSW and the ACT.

NAAPA members look forward to receiving further details on the recent measures announced by the Premier and assisting the NSW Government with their implementation.

It stated recently that "The Premier's tough new measures are an indication that he and the NSW Government understand that to effectively tackle alcohol-fuelled violence you have to be prepared to address the issue of availability. NAAPA has long advocated lockouts and earlier closing hours for both on and off-licence premises and is pleased to see these moderate evidence-based measures adopted."

#### FORMER FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE LAST DRINKS COALITION

The AMA (NSW) was a founding member of the Last Drinks Coalition which successfully put the issue of alcohol-fuelled violence on the political map in the lead-up to the 2011 NSW election.

